6. WHAT WE LEARNED

The story of Nathan Williams
defies stereotypes while
details of his life defy detection.

By all accounts, Nathan Williams was an unusual person. He was a person identified as a literate free black who filed a marriage bond at a time when few people of his race observed this legal nicety. The existence of a marriage bond speaks of money and pretense to financial stability. He very nearly became a landowner, and clearly commanded respect from his wealthy white landlord.

Unfortunately, we cannot know how usual or unusual he was, because the demographics of such people have not been studied in any detail. There were other educated and well-off free black families in antebellum Delaware, notably the Gibbs clan of the Camden area.

Without detailed studies, our understanding of these people must necessarily be hidden behind a veil of stereotypes. For example, the negative impact of the 1829 free education act has been largely ignored in the popular mind in the shadow of its undeniable positive impact on the white population.

Beneficial events frequently have downsides, affecting the most vulnerable people at the bottom of the social and economic ladder. This effect was noted in Wilmington, where a sizable free black population of tradesmen existed before the Civil War, only to disappear during the postwar years when the black population in general should have been benefitting from emancipation (L. Heite 1987: 198, 205, 208).

The family of Mrs. Williams was identified as a "mulatto" in the context of central Delaware's convoluted racial distinctions. They clearly associated with the Indian-descended component of the mulatto population. Her parents probably were David (*c.* 1758 - 1847) and Rachel (*c.*1770 - 1845) Hutt.

The Hutts are among the fifteen identified "mulatto" taxable households listed in the 1819 assessment of Little Creek Hundred (page 17, above). Of those fifteen, eleven are known from genealogies to belong to the Indian descended community.

From a social point of view, in the context of the day, the couple possessed a relatively high status, in spite of the fact that her associates might have considered that she had married downscale racially, even though her husband was literate. We do not know if literacy conferred status within the nonwhite community.

RESEARCH METHODS

The bottom-up approach to site documentation and interpretation was rigorously tested at the Nathan Williams site. In a good-faith effort to fairly represent each person associated with the property under study, special documentary-research tactics must sometimes be employed.

Wealthy, literate and politically active white people are easy to identify and describe because they leave a

copious documentary trail in the public and private records.

Records of poor, illiterate, and disfranchised people are different. The usual well-indexed sources are mostly silent. Instead, poor people will be found in the records of the trustees of the poor, or the petty criminal courts. The hunt for Nathan Williams involved reading a half-century's poorhouse records, combing the Common Pleas dockets, and looking for clues in the tax records.

Without more specific records of the man himself, the only way to flesh out the story of Nathan Williams was to study the community in which he lived. Though spotty, the picture effectively places the man in history. From this experience, it became obvious to the author that Delaware needs a context study of the various nonwhite ethnic groups that developed during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

TENANCY AS A RESEARCH TOPIC

Because history is written by winners of wars and published by dominant populations, losers and lower castes seldom are chronicled from their own point of view. Recent archæological studies of tenant sites in Delaware are a case in point; so many of these studies concern the physical remains and the owners, but not the occupants.

Delaware's historic preservation program has attempted to address tenant issues in a context prepared by University of Delaware scholars. The context drew upon court, probaate, insurance, and poorhouse records in an effort to formulate a profile of agricultural tenants in the state (Siders, Herman, Ames, Marth, Lanier, Watson, Bellingrath, VanDolsen, Bashman and Chase 1991).

Studies of non-landowners can be complicated in a society where ownership of land was the basis for measuring relative wealth. Social status is another difficult subject where the landless classes are concerned. In Kent County the leading families could be identified because they dwelt in two-story brick houses and married one another. They were white; if they weren't genetically white, nearly everyone treated them as if they were.

The vast majority (two-thirds in Little Creek Hundred) of people on the tax assessment were not listed with enough land to support a family. In some localities, a 20-acre holding was considered a "smallholder" farm that required outside employment of the occupant family. Under this definition, Nathan Williams would have needed to work, probably as a laborer on another farmer's land. Delaware assessors considered a parcel of less than ten acres to be a "lot" rather than acreage (Siders *et al*. 1991:xiii).

Many of these people were "poor white" families who did not marry people who lived in two-story brick houses, or they belonged to the Indian-descended colored population, who married only among themselves. A few taxable households were headed by free negroes, who represented the bottom rung of the traditional class ladder.

Archæological reports on tenant-occupied historic sites have typically been written from the top down. Much of the historical background research has been concerned with the property owner, while the physical evidence related mostly to the tenants, who not infrequently were unidentified. A quick review of the descriptions of tenants recent published tenant sites will convey something of the scope of this issue.

The Grant Tenancy site report (Taylor, Thompson, Snyder and Gardner 1987) dwelt at length on the site owners, but never named a single tenant. The authors did, however, ascertain that the material possessions of the tenant were on a par with those of certain landowners.

In contrast, studies of the Cazier gatehouse residence near Glasgow included detailed biographical data on the tenant families, some of whom were interviewed for the report (Hoseth, Catts, and Tinsman 1994). Studies of the tenants in this case were made relatively easy by the site's recent date and the survival of a rural community that included the tenant family.

Also near Glasgow, the Thomas Williams site report interpreted both owner-occupants and tenants in relatively equal biographical detail (Catts and Custer 1990).

William Eager was the owner-occupant of his Little Creek Hundred homestead from 1866 to 1877, but the house was occupied for a half-century, usually by tenants. All the site occupants, both owner and tenant, were discussed in a mere seven pages of the report (Grettler, Bachman, Custer, and Jamison 1991). They were, however, identified by name even though they were presented without biographical details.

At structure A on Patterson Lane near Christiana, African-American tenant David Walmsley is not only identified, but his artifacts are related to activities of his family. Nearby, the Heisler tenancy was identified by the name of its owner, and none of the tenants were identified (Catts, Hodny and Custer 1989: 217-224). In these two examples there was an attempt to interpret the lives of the tenants, rather than merely catalogue their belongings. However, the background research was not sufficient to determine who lived on the sites through the years.

None of these reports of tenant sites are primarily about the tenants, though some contain more or less than others about the people who created the sites. The reports reflect a definite trend toward dealing more fully with the tenants, however.

SURVEY INTENSITY AND RESULTS

This site was studied once before, at the "location and identification" level, which means that there are two independent bodies of archæological information. Comparison of these two bodies of data might enable us to measure the relative effectiveness of more intense research methods that were employed the second time.

The 1992 survey, which was not tightly controlled as the 1997 survey, yielded similar materials (Heite and Blume 1995: 104-106). Like the later survey, the 1992 investigations yielded a few very early pieces, including dark beverage bottle fragments, that belong to a period before the time of Nathan Williams. Shell edged pearlware, for example, should have been long out of style when Williams arrived, and the beverage bottle material includes eighteenth-century types. These may have been second-hand items of little value that could have been obtained easily by poor households.

While features were found below the plowzone during both projects, none could be unequivocally attributed to the Nathan Williams period on the basis of artifact content. The surface material from both campaigns included material from the Williams period as well as earlier and later material.

Williams probably occupied a site that was already cleared, if not already developed. On the USGS topographic map (figure 3, page 9) the fifty-foot contour line on the map almost precisely outlines the Williams eleven acres. This elevated site could have attracted the earlier tenants on the Loockerman estate, for permanent or temporary sites. The "cart road" that is now the driveway served at least two households before McKee Road was opened.

At the outset, the investigators accepted the proposition that the house site itself was very likely to have been destroyed by widening McKee Road during the twentieth century. The narrow line of artifacts from the original surface collection was interpreted as the expected buildup of artifacts from a swept yard. As it developed the larger scope of the second surface survey revealed a distribution pattern of artifacts that had escaped yard sweeping.

Since many important sites are found in less than pristine condition, it is important to consider what can be done with whatever remains. If a site is otherwise significant, the archæological aspects may be less critical to the mix of attributes that make up significance.

THIS PROPERTY TYPE

The homesite of an educated free black in the antebellum period is an uncommon property type in the archæological literature. Only one has been previously identified in the Middle Atlantic slave states.

Economic Analysis of the Benjamin Banneker Site (1737-1806) is the nearest comparison. Banneker was another educated landowning black person whose association with well-off white people can be documented (Peters 1986). In 1755, free black landholders represented less than two percent of the entire Maryland population. A similar situation is reflected in a Delaware tax list of 1778 (page 16, above).

Like Williams, it appears that Banneker was assisted by Quaker abolitionists and educators, and the artifacts from his site indicate a comfortable middling material environment, including refined English tablewares. The similarities to the later Williams site are unavoidable, but two sites do not constitute a property type that can be interpreted and studied in depth.

SIGNIFICANCE

At first blush, it would appear that a badly-truncated (but potentially significant) site lacks the integrity to qualify for eligibility under criterion D. Upon reflection, this project offered an opportunity to examine the potential rewards of studying such a site.

Documentary research is a necessary accompaniment of any cultural resource project. In the course of such research, a site's significant associations the other criteria might come to light. This happened at the Nathan Williams house site. The owner's literacy, his involvement with the people who were trying to school colored people at a time when such education was illegal or at least frowned upon, gives a clue to an undocumented phase of Delaware educational history.

The artifacts, and accompanying records, have been conveyed to the Delaware State Museums.